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SUBJECT: MFA INQUIRIES ABOUT USG IRAN-WATCHING FUNCTIONS IN DUBAI

Classified by Ambassador Michele Sison, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador and Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) have had several conversations regarding the functions of the USG's Dubai Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO), most recently on December 5. On December 6, at AbZ's request, Ambassador met with Acting MFA number two Tariq Al-Haidan, following Iran-inspired media attention questioning the "anti-Iranian" activities of the USG on UAE soil. Ambassador reminded Al-Haidan how open we had been throughout the process of establishing IRPO, cited the importance of publicly acknowledging IRPO's presence to further our engagement goals, and noted Washington's expectation that the UAE would support U.S. diplomatic activities focused on Iran. Al-Haidan stuck to his talking points on IRPO, yet digressed into broader discussions of the troubled relationship the UAE had with Tehran. Ambassador acknowledged UAE sensitivities over negative media campaigns while reminding Al-Haidan of U.S. goals and openness. Visiting NEA/IR Deputy Director joined the meeting, emphasizing the transparency of U.S. Iran-watching activities in Dubai. End summary.

¶2. (C) At the request of Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) Al Nahyan, MFA Acting Under Secretary Tariq Al-Haidan invited Ambassador December 6 to discuss the Iran Regional Presence Office (IRPO) in Dubai and recent media attention focused on USG Iran-watching activities. Iran has been stirring up media stories characterizing IRPO activities as clandestine and detrimental to regional stability. Ambassador led the conversation by noting that she had discussed IRPO's role with AbZ many times since March 2006, openly spelling out the staffing and goals of the office to avoid any confusion when IRPO began work in August. She reminded Al-Haidan that IRPO is physically located inside the U.S. Consulate in Dubai and staffed by State Department diplomats (identifying the primary function of each of the five staff members). Ambassador was joined in the meeting by visiting NEA/IR Deputy Director Henry Wooster.

¶3. (C) Al-Haidan asked why the U.S. was so public about its "Iran" presence in Dubai when the office could operate quietly out of the U.S. Consulate with no public notice. A former ambassador to Iran, he asked why Dubai played such a central role in our Iran-watching activities. Ambassador stressed the U.S. desire to reach out to the Iranian people, which required public acknowledgement of our efforts; an ongoing International Visitor Medical Diplomacy exchange involving Iranian doctors is one manifestation of the fruits of that outreach. Ambassador lamented the fact that Iran was making a fuss of a very straightforward presence. She noted

that the Iranian Interests Section in Washington operated with 40-plus staff and engaged in visa, passport, and social services, plus public affairs, student counseling, and support for cultural events. Responding to Al-Haidan's query about why the U.S. had not established a similar presence in Tehran, Wooster explained the parameters of the Algiers Accord which prevented the U.S. from doing so. He added that Iran-watchers in London, Berlin, Baku, Istanbul, Kabul, Ashgabat, and Baghdad functioned similar to those at IRPO in Dubai.

¶4. (C) Somewhat satisfied that few other cities compared with Dubai in terms of the Iranian presence, Al-Haidan then inquired about the nature of meetings with Iranian nationals, asking whether IRPO rented rooms for that purpose.

Ambassador replied that meetings were conducted openly. Al-Haidan said the UAEG was uncomfortable with Iran's accusations that America was working against it in Dubai. Ambassador asked whether the Iranian government had, as its MFA spokesman had announced, in fact made a formal protest to the UAEG on the IRPO. Al-Haidan confirmed that Iran had not.

Ambassador highlighted the fact that Iran was clearly disingenuous, using the media to stir up sentiment without engaging the UAE in a factual discussion about the small size and open, diplomatic nature of IRPO. There was no valid basis for Iran's complaint about the IRPO in Dubai.

¶5. (C) Wooster acknowledged the potential for Iran to mis-characterize the U.S. presence, which we could best combat through transparency. Dubai contained the most significant Iranian Diaspora community, making it a natural locale for U.S. diplomatic and public diplomacy outreach to the Iranian people. (Al-Haidan put the Iranian population in

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the UAE at between 250 and 300 thousand). Ambassador noted that we have no dispute with the Iranian people, but we take issue with the policy of their government -- the U.S. needed to reach out through IRPO Dubai and other locations to engage in people-to-people diplomacy and other outreach and exchange programs and expected the UAE to support those efforts. The mandate of the IRPO is to provide the USG with a broad political-economic analysis of the situation inside Iran and to foster public diplomacy and cultural ties. Al-Haidan stated again that the USG could pursue all of these functions without the word "Iran" on the office door. Ambassador replied that hiding our desire for outreach to the Iranian people would be counterproductive. Wooster noted also the many Iran-related activities that take place in Dubai, many with an American connection of one kind or another, but with no relation to IRPO or the USG. Iran had a tendency to blame the USG for everything it found irksome.

¶6. (C) Al-Haidan was open about UAE concerns regarding Iran, yet noted also the extensive trade and commercial relationship that benefits the UAE (and creates a strategic dilemma for the UAEG). He cited what the Iranians called a "misunderstanding" over Iran's blatant occupation of three UAE islands, for example, and said that official Iranian visitors to the UAE often said things "completely different" from reality. He pointed to Iranian arrogance about its presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon; "we will be everywhere," they seemed to assert. He said Iran boasted that potential future U.S. sanctions would only have a minimal impact. He suggested that any discussion with Iran would get hung up on the nuclear question; one cannot talk to Iran (about Iraq, for example) without reference to the nuclear file. Additionally, Iran is "part of the problem" in Iraq and therefore not a credible partner in any "international conference" on Iraq, said Al-Haidan. He said he saw no difference between Khomeini and Hakim -- although Allawi and Hakim were different (one being a "national Iraqi" and the other a "national Shi'a"). He chided Hakim for calling on Iraq to pay war compensation to Iran; that is not an Iraqi national interest but an Iranian position, he emphasized.

¶7. (C) Ambassador again acknowledged UAE sensitivities over Iran-inspired media reports while reminding Al-Haidan of the strong U.S. conviction about reaching out to the Iranian people. She hoped the UAEG would continue to share that conviction and support our common efforts towards a more stable region. In particular, she reiterated that the U.S. expectation of UAEG support for IRPO as its makeup and activity had been discussed over the past eight months or so.

Our activities are in the open, she emphasized.

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